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SUBJECT: BINGO! GOV CAPTURES LABOR LEADER

Classified By: Political Counselor Abelardo A. Arias for reason 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Venezuelan authorities captured Venezuelan Workers' Confederation (CTV) President Carlos Ortega outside a Caracas bingo hall March 1. Ortega faces charges of treason, conspiracy and rebellion in connection with the opposition marches and the two-month national strike from December 2002 to February 2003. A Caracas court March 2 ordered that he be held in custody pending trial. The CTV President had political asylum in Costa Rica from March 2003 until August 2004. When Costa Rica revoked Ortega's asylum because he allegedly violated its terms, he returned clandestinely to Venezuela. Ortega has been an almost forgotten opposition figure since his exile, except perhaps among his cohorts in organized labor and those that remember his leadership negatively. As such his capture cannot be considered a blow to Venezuela's opposition. For the GoV, however, Ortega's capture is a coup that President Hugo Chavez and his supporters will exploit to rail about the illegitimacy of the opposition and to intimidate opponents. End Summary.

12. (C) Venezuelan Workers' Confederation (CTV) President Carlos Ortega has been a wanted man for nearly two years. Culminating with the national strike that paralyzed much of Venezuela from December 2002 to February 2003, Ortega's activities in opposition to President Hugo Chavez resulted in his being accused of rebellion, treason and conspiracy. Arguing that he would not receive a fair trial and that he feared for his life, he sought and obtained political asylum from Costa Rica in March 2003. He had reportedly returned to Venezuela in August 2004, prior to the presidential recall referendum. Although fellow labor leaders confirmed Ortega's return publicly, the CTV president refrained from public political activity.

13. (U) Ortega's defense lawyer told reporters that Venezuelan authorities (CICPC) intercepted Ortega when he was transferring from one car to another outside a Caracas bingo hall March 1. Ortega had changed his appearance, darkening his hair and sporting a mustache, and reportedly presented identity documents in the name of a different person. Ortega was accompanied by a woman, according to press reports, who was briefly detained and released. The authorities brought him before a judge March 2 at which time his relatives had the opportunity to see him. The judge ordered that Ortega remain in custody pending trial.

CTV reaction

14. (U) CTV Secretary General Manuel Cova told reporters that his colleague is now a political prisoner. Cova convened a meeting of the CTV executive committee which ratified its support for Ortega and demanded that Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez guarantee Ortega's safety. Noting that the GoV is "on the margin of the law" when it comes to labor rights, Cova said the CTV has notified the international labor community and will file another complaint with the International Labor Organization. After the CICPC refused to allow Cova to visit, the CTV Secretary General reiterated the concern for Ortega's physical safety and respect for his rights.

GoV Reaction

15. (U) National Assembly President Nicolas Maduro told reporters that Ortega's capture is "an end to impunity and consolidates stability and peace in the country." He mocked Chavez's opponents, saying that it appeared that Ortega was "partying" at a discotheque instead of being in "the resistance" fighting in the hills. Maduro said Ortega should bear the responsibility for the damage he caused Venezuela since the labor leader brought many lives and businesses to ruin. Fifth Republic Movement Luis Tascon attributed Ortega's capture to divisions within the CTV. Without

providing further detail, he suggested that some CTV leaders leaked details about Ortega's whereabouts to bring him down. (A CICPC spokesman told reporters that neighbors' concerned about movements in an unoccupied house led the authorities to the place where Ortega apparently had been staying in recent times.)

Comment

16. (C) When Ortega went into exile in March 2003, he left the Venezuelan political stage. The conditions under which Costa Rica granted him political asylum muzzled Ortega during the year that Chavez opponents focused all their energies on the presidential recall referendum. Additionally, he and FEDECAMARAS President Carlos Fernandez were mostly remembered for "the failure" of the national strike. Thus, although he is a well-known figure among opponents of President Chavez and still enjoyed some support and loyalty in labor circles, his capture is not likely to affect present opposition efforts significantly.

17. (C) For the GoV and Chavez supporters, however, Ortega's capture is a coup. Catching him near a gambling establishment was quickly translated into "proof" of the labor leader's lack of moral standing. The judicial proceedings now will provide a stage for the GoV to maintain public attention on the alleged sins of the opposition and to blame others, instead of the Chavez administration, for the evident shortcomings and failings of the Bolivarian Revolution.
Brownfield